

10 New Books We Recommend This Week; Editors' Choice

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Highlight: Suggested reading from critics and editors at The New York Times.

Body

The great American Zen poet and eco-warrior Gary Snyder turns 90 on Friday. I've been thinking a lot about Snyder lately, along with other nature-minded writers like Annie Dillard and Barry Lopez, as I've grown more restless during lockdown and started spending time in the deep woods where I live. (OK, they're not that deep. But neither was Walden — Thoreau brought laundry to his mother's house! — and they at least give the illusion of solitude.) Snyder's no hermit. One thing I admire about his work is its sense of fellowship: how alert it is to the links between land and politics and culture. He writes about nature, sure, but also about human nature. In honor of his birthday, maybe spend a few minutes reading "Axe Handles" or "Above Pate Valley."

There's not much nature on this week's list of recommended titles, but there's plenty of politics and culture. You could read Lawrence Wright's prescient new pandemic thriller, "The End of October," if you dare. You say you prefer your world affairs without viruses? In that case we might suggest Dalia Sofer's novel "Man of My Time," about an Iranian man's path from revolutionary to government interrogator, or Gotz Aly's history "Europe Against the Jews," about the 19th-century political spasms that led to the Holocaust. There's "In Deep," in which David Rohde investigates the alleged existence of a bureaucratic deep state, or "The Inevitability of Tragedy," in which Barry Gewen (a longtime editor at the Book Review) traces the roots of Henry Kissinger's political philosophy. Or there's "Nobody's Child," Susan Nordin Vinocour's incisive look at the problems and promise of the insanity defense as it's used in American jurisprudence.

We also recommend a Gothic novel set in the Italian Alps, a story collection about refugees and immigrants in North America, a memoiristic biography of the woman who founded Weight Watchers, and an immersion in the ways of French cooking courtesy of Bill Buford's "Dirt" — which, come to think of it, has a lot to do with nature after all.

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THE END OF OCTOBER, by Lawrence Wright. (Knopf, \$27.95.) "The sweeping, authoritative and genuinely intelligent thriller — the sort of novel in which the author employs a bulldozer and a scalpel at the same time — is a rare specimen," our critic Dwight Garner writes, and "The End of October" is one of those rarities. "The fact that it's about the world in shock and ruin because of a virus similar to Covid-19 makes it read as if it's been shot out of a cannon."

MAN OF MY TIME, by Dalia Sofer. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$27.) Sofer's second novel traces a man's path from "baffled revolutionary" in Iran to complicit actor in a ruthless regime sure he can undermine the system from inside. It is a master class in layering together a character who is essentially unforgivable but no less captivating. "With Sofer's considerable talents, the betrayals (of both self and others) that leave Hamid a brittle shell of a man are fully worthy of our intense gaze," Rebecca Makkai writes in her review.

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THE ANCESTOR, by Danielle Trussoni. (Morrow/HarperCollins, \$27.99.) When a genetic testing site reveals ordinary Bert Monte to be Countess Alberta Montebianco, heiress to a grand old estate in the Italian Alps, she decides to claim her birthright. Trussoni's Gothic novel explores what happens next. "The central contradictions in 'The Ancestor' reside in the questions of who we are and where we belong — of what divides us and what unites us," Carol Goodman writes in her review. "Those are the mysteries we're invited to discover in this chilling and inventive novel."

NOBODY'S CHILD: A Tragedy, a Trial and a History of the Insanity Defense, by Susan Nordin Vinocour. (Norton, \$28.95.) The insanity defense, deployed in fewer than 1 percent of criminal cases and successful only about a quarter of the time, nevertheless looms large in debates about crime and punishment. Vinocour shows the injustices of this sliver of our legal system meant to bring together psychiatric research and criminal law. "She makes her case delicately, every page offering an incriminating new piece of evidence, scientific fact or court case that demonstrates just how unjust our legal system is to anyone suffering the misfortune of mental illness," our reviewer, Rachel Louise Snyder, writes.

THE INEVITABILITY OF TRAGEDY: Henry Kissinger and His World, by Barry Gewen. (Norton, \$30.) In this magisterial account, Gewen, a longtime editor at the Book Review, traces the historical and philosophical roots of Kissinger's famous realism, situating him in the context of Hannah Arendt and a cohort of other Jewish intellectuals who escaped Nazi Germany. The book is "a timely and acute defense of the great realist's actions, values and beliefs," according to John A. Farrell's review. "Gewen's book is a thoughtful rumination on human behavior, philosophy and international relations,"

IN DEEP: The FBI, the CIA, and the Truth About America's "Deep State," by David Rohde. (Norton, \$30.) Rohde examines Donald Trump's contention that there is a deep state trying to undermine his presidency, offering a history of the conspiracy theory and concluding that, despite the presence of an "institutional government" made up of career civil servants, there is no such thing. "Some of the book's most fascinating passages trace the rise of William Barr, Trump's attorney general, from his time as a C.I.A. intern," Fred Kaplan writes in his review. "Rohde highlights Barr's activism, along with a small group of other conservative lawyers, in the Federalist Society and the Catholic Information Center, which now exercise enormous influence. ... The tale of these groups is worth an entire book."

HOW TO PRONOUNCE KNIFE: Stories, by Souvankham Thammavongsa. (Little, Brown, \$26.) Most of the characters in this spare and rigorous debut collection by Thammavongsa, a Canadian writer and poet, are immigrants in unnamed North American cities, struggling with loneliness and the challenges of mastering the English language. "Thammavongsa's spare, rigorous stories are preoccupied with themes of alienation and dislocation, her characters burdened by the sense of existing unseen," Sarah Resnick writes in her review. "Thammavongsa's gift for the gently absurd means the stories never feel dour or predictable, even when their outcomes are by some measure bleak."

THIS IS BIG: How the Founder of Weight Watchers Changed the World — and Me, by Marisa Meltzer. (Little, Brown, \$28.) This is a story of kinship between two women who never met: Meltzer, a journalist, and Jean Nidetch, the founder of Weight Watchers. The two have more in common than their struggles with the scale, as Meltzer frankly details. "By toggling between Nidetch's story and her own, Meltzer positions herself and the weight-loss icon as battle buddies of a sort, separated by time and space, yet bound by efforts to lose weight and to thrive within the boundaries imposed on women of their respective generations," our reviewer, Lily Burana, writes. "Meltzer has created a singular companionate text for those who know the agony of frustration surrounding weight as an issue, both personal and political."

EUROPE AGAINST THE JEWS: 1880-1945, by Gotz Aly. (Metropolitan/Holt, \$32.99.) The origins of the Holocaust, Aly argues, are to be found in the rise of nationalism and the persecution of minorities that began in the late 19th century and solidified in the welter of new nation-states after World War I. "Aly's reminder of the usefulness of taking a close look at the quiet horrors of Europe's interwar years ... feels all the more valuable today," Steven J. Zipperstein writes in his review. "And his acknowledgment that comparisons between now and then — once the

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province of the ill-informed — deserve more serious attention from historians and others is just one of many reminders as to how far we've stumbled into an age of troubled sleep.”

DIRT: Adventures in Lyon as a Chef in Training, Father, and Sleuth Looking for the Secret of French Cooking, by Bill Buford. (Knopf, \$28.95.) Buford, whose last book was about Italian food, here delivers a delightful exploration of his immersion in French cuisine and its soul. “This book may well be an even greater pleasure than its predecessor,” Lisa Abend writes, reviewing it alongside two other culinary memoirs. “He tangles with the bêtes noires of every Anglophone in France — the language, the bureaucracy, the arrogance — and embarks, to the great nationalistic dismay of all around him, on a quixotic investigation to prove an Italian origin theory for pot au feu and other French classics.”

PHOTOS

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